

School Funding Battle Heats Up In Legislature

Wealthiest Towns Get Less State Money

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The state's education funding formula has become lopsided, unfair and "totally, purely political," the top House Republican says.

It is so skewed, he said, that for every income-tax dollar Hartford pays in, the city gets back \$4.39 in overall state aid. Greenwich, one of Connecticut's wealthiest towns, gets only 2 cents on every dollar its taxpayers pay.

House GOP leader Robert Ward said Friday it's time to scrap the system and write a new and fair formula for distributing Connecticut's wealth.

The cities need and deserve more state funding than affluent Fairfield County towns, Ward said, but the public is unaware how disproportionate the funding has become.

"I thought it was skewed, but I had no idea it was as far as it is," Ward said. "This cries out for some fairness. ... The formula is totally skewed, not a little bit skewed."

Money for schools makes up most of state funding to municipalities, and Hartford collected the most in cost-sharing funds this fiscal year - nearly \$165 million. By contrast, more than 35 towns are receiving less than \$1 million this year - the lowest being Cornwall at less than \$60,000.

During a press conference Friday at the state Capitol complex, Ward appeared with fellow Republicans displaying a map color-coded to show the amounts each town receives. A separate map displayed the words "Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport" to show which municipalities receive the most money.

That map prompted a heated response from Rep. Christopher Caruso of Bridgeport, who confronted House Republican chief of staff Andrew Norton after the news conference.

Caruso, a Democrat, charged that Republicans were being divisive, pitting the cash-strapped cities against the affluent towns.

"You should burn that," Caruso said to Norton, a former state legislator who was holding one of the posters from the news conference. "You should be ashamed of yourself. You know what, Andy, you should live in Bridgeport for a week. ... It's just wrong, and it's offensive. It's shameful."

Norton tried to interject, but Caruso would not let up, saying, "I think you guys go to college to get stupid. You haven't seen Bridgeport, Andy, and you know it."

Norton finally responded, "Your mock disappointment is just cheap theater."

Ward, who was standing several feet away, was drawn into the debate, but said he did not want to get into a personal argument with Caruso.

"If we don't give him all the money, he's offended," Ward said. "My job isn't to worry about insulting people. It's to put the facts out. When [Democrats in the

cities] continually call for tax increases, that's easy to do because their constituents aren't paying it."

The answer to the problem, Ward said, is to scrap the complicated funding formula and rewrite it. The formula includes more than 20 different factors, including the number of students on welfare and in special education, mastery test scores, per capita income, and the three-year average of the town's "net equalized grand list," among others. The formula has been changed annually since 1988.

Ward's press conference ignited a philosophical debate over the so-called millionaires' tax and who is paying their fair share of the state income tax. Democrats have repeatedly said that those earning more than \$1 million annually are not paying enough to fund the state's needs. Republicans have countered with state statistics that show the top 7 percent of taxpayers - a group that includes taxpayers earning \$150,000 or more - ante up more in state income tax than the bottom 93 percent combined.

Sen. Thomas Gaffey, a Meriden Democrat, said he, too, is looking for fairness regarding the state's wealthiest citizens.

"These folks clearly can afford more," Gaffey said. "This is going to be a big fight this year, and we're throwing the gauntlet down now."

Rep. Andrew Fleischmann, a West Hartford Democrat, said the current funding is appropriate because the legislature is required, under a court mandate, to provide equal educational opportunity for children.

"There are no Democratic or Republican children, the last time I checked," Fleischmann said, adding that Ward should "put his partisan blinders aside."

At the same time that Ward's news conference was being held, the education committee was meeting in a nearby room to hear school officials and municipal leaders ask for more state money for public schools. They urged lawmakers to remove spending limits that have prevented full funding of the cost-sharing grant, the major form of state school aid.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposal to increase the cost-sharing grant by 2 percent "does not even allow districts to keep up with inflation," said Jean Lafave, representing the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education.

Although the association supported Rell's plan to increase state aid for excess special education costs, Lafave urged lawmakers not to limit the increase to the \$25 million proposed in Rell's budget.

Lafave, however, supports Rell's proposals to increase funding for magnet and charter schools and pre-school education.

Bridgeport Mayor John Fabrizi said the over-reliance on property taxes "is a major impediment to achieving educational excellence and equity." From the time the state first imposed a cap on the educational cost-saving grant a decade ago, the cap has cost Bridgeport \$125 million, he said.

Officials from West Hartford, long known for its support of public schools, told the committee that significant population shifts, including growing numbers of low-income families, have pushed the school budget to the limit.

Unless there is a change in the state aid formula, "we cannot continue to adequately fund public education," West Hartford Mayor Scott Slifka testified. "We are not wealthy and cannot continue to do this on our own."

